



How did the Gaelic élite of Ulster respond to their dispossession?
Marc Caball analyses the work of some bardic poets to provide an answer.

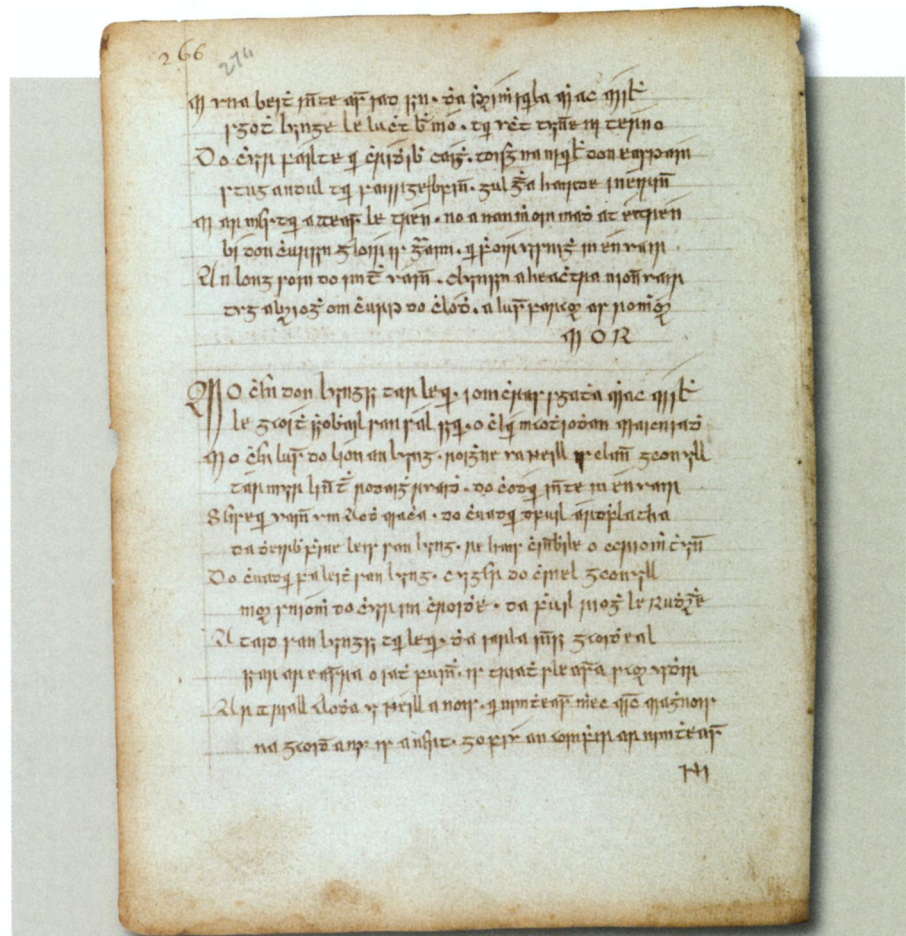
Dispossession and reaction: the Gaelic literati and the Plantation of Ulster

Opposite page: *The Departure of O'Neill out of Ireland*, by Thomas Ryan, RHA. Ulster, traditionally a bastion of Gaelic society and culture, was transformed by the military defeat and subsequent departure of the northern earls, Rory O'Donnell and Hugh O'Neill, to the Continent.

Right: An anonymous poem in the *Book of O'Conor Don* (1631), beginning (second paragraph) *Mochean don loing si tar lear* ('Good luck to that ship'), reflects bitterly on the exile of the northern earls from Ireland. (NLI/Irish Script on Screen)

During the first decade of the seventeenth century, Ulster, traditionally a bastion of Gaelic society and culture, was transformed in a relatively short time by the military defeat and subsequent departure to the Continent of the northern earls, Rory O'Donnell and Hugh O'Neill. Moreover, the unsuccessful revolt in 1608 of Sir Cahir O'Doherty persuaded the London government to curtail drastically the autonomy of the remaining Gaelic lords in the province. The proposed new political and social settlement entailed wholesale confiscation of lands and the introduction of a large cohort of settlers from Britain. In effect, the process known as plantation aimed to create a cultural and social *tabula rasa* in a region that had been characterised by a long-established indigenous culture.

The response of the Gaelic intellectual élite to the plantation of Ulster is broadly defined by a powerful and pervasive sense of trauma, alienation and communal dispossession. In an anonymous poem in the *Book of O'Conor Don* (1631), which reflects bitterly on the exile of the northern earls from Ireland, many of the key themes and motifs that inform a bardic interpretative pattern of despondency, dislocation and personal agency are forcefully expressed. In this poem, beginning *Mochean don loing si tar lear* ('Good luck to that ship'), the full impact and implications of a fundamental shift in the perception and exercise of authority and ethnic integrity are acutely and clinically delineated. While focusing on the immediate fate of O'Donnell and O'Neill, the author is unambiguous in his portrayal of a tragic but emblematic development that reverberates ominously across the island of Ireland. The departure of these advocates of Gaelic suzerainty signals the demise of collective autonomy. In fact, the literal and actual



Bardic or praise poetry

Gaelic praise poets were custodians of a rich and complex cultural inheritance. Composed by a professional cohort broadly between 1250 and 1650, bardic or praise poetry reflects the ideology of the seigneurial milieu in which it was produced. A central function of the poet was the provision of dynastic and cultural validation for the aristocratic élite. Drawing on a generic stock of literary motifs and conventions, poets established and articulated the legitimacy of a ruling or potential lord before fellow noblemen and the inhabitants of his territory. Praise poetry enshrined pivotal concepts and tropes that underpinned and informed conventional notions of lordship.

supremacy of the *Gaoidhil* accompanies the passengers of this vessel across the seas to the Continent, and collective disgrace has resulted. Ireland lies inanimate and passive, such is the debilitating nature of the disaster consequent on the exile of the earls and their kinsmen. Imploring protection from the Holy Trinity for the ship's passengers, the poet also stresses the depth of his own distress. In effect, therefore, the impact of this transformation in Ireland was manifest on a variety of levels: national, provincial, dynastic, familial and personal.

'Where have the *Gaoidhil* gone?'

These sentiments are echoed in another poem in the *Book of O'Conor Don*. Beginning *Cáit ar ghabhadar Gaoidhil?* ('Where have the *Gaoidhil* gone?'),

Lochlainn Ó Dálaigh laments a dramatic reversal of fortune for aristocratic Gaelic society. Traditional Gaelic haunts and pursuits are neglected following the dispersal and exile of the warrior élite from all parts of Ireland. The place of the Gaelic nobility has been usurped by arrogant *arriviste* interlopers of base origin from England and Scotland. These newcomers now divide the island among themselves and denominate their holdings in 'acres'. Ireland resembles a chessboard robbed of its authentic chessmen that have been replaced by upstarts. Change for the worse has occurred. Places of worship have been occupied by intruders, religious services conducted in the open, clergymen's vestments used as bedding for cattle. Fairs have taken the place of hunts,

Eochaidh Ó hEódhusa

Born c. 1568, Eochaidh Ó hEódhusa was a member of a family that had emerged as professional poets in the early fourteenth century, and by the end of the sixteenth century they were affiliated to the Maguire lords of Fermanagh. References to Eochaidh occur in a series of pardons granted to the Maguires and their associates in the period from 1586 to 1592. Ó hEódhusa successfully negotiated the legal and administrative challenges deriving from the consolidation of the Crown's writ in Ulster in the first decade of the seventeenth century. He was included in a general pardon to the Maguires and denizens of Fermanagh granted in 1607. Moreover, despite the bardic emphasis on Gaelic dispossession and dislocation, Ó hEódhusa is also listed among the 'natives names & proportions' on the basis of a plantation grant in 1610–11 of 100 acres in the Fermanagh baronies of Coole and Tirkennedy, as well as 210 acres in the Clanawley barony.

agricultural cultivation has displaced horse racing, and former aristocratic residences have been replaced by new homesteads. Nobody among the Gaelic Irish has cause for joy. Ominously, the cultural rituals of high Gaelic civility have also been submerged. Praise poetry, harp and organ music, dynastic tales and genealogical scholarship no longer appeal to the *Gaoidhil*, such is the severity of the oppression that they endure. The banishment of the Gaelic Irish is not, however, ascribed to foreign military superiority but to divine wrath. Historically, the transgressions of other peoples, such as the 'sons of Israel' and the 'great race of Maccabaeus', also incurred divine punishment. Each of these peoples had secured forgiveness through condign repentance. The poet laments the failure of his own people to atone for their sinful misdeeds. Atonement promised deliverance but, in the meantime, divine retribution had enabled the 'men of Scotland' and the 'youths of London' to supplant the Gaelic Irish.

Gaelic Irish compared to the ancient Greeks

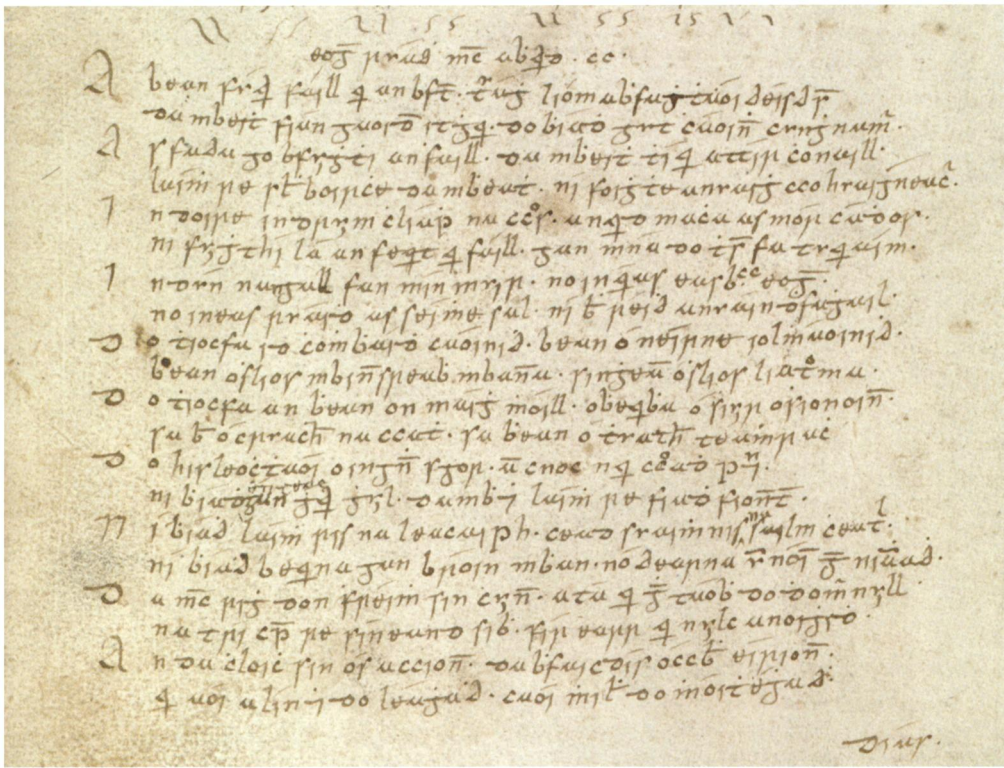
Eochaidh Ó hEódhusa addressed the poem beginning *Beag mhaireas do mhacraidh Ghaoidheal* ('Few remain of the Gaelic youth') to Brian MacMahon of Oriel. It is indelibly marked by a deep vein of political pessimism. The Irish are in a state of pronounced despondency, their everyday existence resembles a living death, and nothing within the author's purview provides a reason for joy. Indeed, today all have their appointed time for mourning. Overcome by a destructive wave, the Gaelic warrior band is inert. Hearts burdened by enveloping weariness, it is clear that the men of the Greek-like Gaelic Irish are deeply dispirited. The comparison of the Irish to the ancient Greeks appears to infer a historical analogy for the present demise of a once-vibrant culture. Indeed, the distressed state of the *Gaoidhil* is instructive in its sermon-like nature, and the juxtaposition of references to the pagan ancient world and the quintessentially Christian medium of the sermon is disconcerting and suggestive of contemporary turmoil. The period of prosperity allocated to the nobles of Ireland has been spent, and once again the notion of a catastrophic wave is invoked to emphasise transformation and profound dislocation. Gaelic noblemen are in a state of acquiescence. Ó hEódhusa describes how the warrior élite had abandoned their martial discipline and routine. Indeed, their previous belligerence currently strikes him as having been possibly imaginary. The passivity of the *Gaoidhil* is not merely evidenced by their lack of martial vigour; it is also apparent in their neglect of traditional pursuits such as hunting, athletics and horsemanship. Then, rather startlingly, given the bleak despondence and apparent fatalism of the preceding quatrains, Ó hEódhusa declares that there yet remains an unextinguished spark among the Gaelic Irish that will revive their spirits. The insistent emphasis on the passivity of the Gaelic nobility is remarkable, and their indifference to martial endeavour implies a process of demasculinisation. Moreover, the poet also seems to suggest that the emollient quality of the majority will be redeemed by the regenerative intervention of a resurgent minority.

Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird

Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird was born in the 1560s into a learned family historically linked to the O'Donnells of Tyrconnell. In the wake of the Flight of the Earls in 1607, Mac an Bhaird travelled to the Continent. In contemporary Spanish records he is mentioned as one of the earl of Tyrconnell's retinue in Flanders in 1607–8. Later Spanish references place Eoghan Ruadh in Hugh O'Neill's service in Flanders and in Rome (1612–14) and indicate that he received an allowance from the Spanish monarchy from as early as 1608. He maintained his association with the O'Donnells, especially with Nuala, the wife of Niall Garbh O'Donnell (d. 1625) and the sister of Aodh Ruadh (d. 1602), who was documented as living in Louvain at this period. A selection of poems in the 'Book of O'Donnell's daughter' (Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels, MS 6131–3), a compendium of work dedicated to various members of the family and possibly compiled in Flanders for Nuala, is ascribed to Eoghan Ruadh. It has been suggested on the basis of a contemporary manuscript reference to 'D. Eugenius Vardeus, nobilis Hibernus' that he was still alive in 1625 and resident in Rome.

The loneliness of Nuala O'Donnell

In the poem beginning *A bhean fuair faille ar an bhfeart* ('My lady who has found the tomb unattended'), Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird addresses Nuala O'Donnell, wife of Niall Garbh O'Donnell (d. 1625) and sister of Aodh Ruadh (d. 1602), who is presented as a solitary mourner at the tomb of her brothers and nephew in Rome: Rory O'Donnell (d. 1608), Cathbharr O'Donnell (d. 1608) and Aodh Óg O'Neill (d. 1609). The first eight quatrains of the composition centre on the poet's graphic delineation of the loneliness of Nuala's vigil in Rome in contrast to what surely would have been a communal process of grieving and mourning had this tragic scenario unfolded in Ireland. In fact, in the opening quatrain Mac an Bhaird suggests that even in Rome Nuala would not have faced such daunting tribulations unsupported had Gaelic warriors been present. Had the deaths occurred in Derry, Drumcliff or Armagh, the poet asserts that



Above: In the poem beginning *A bhean fuair faill ar an bhfeart* ('My lady who has found the tomb unattended'), Eoghan Ruadh Mac an Bhaird addresses Nuala O'Donnell right, as imagined by artist John Conway, wife of Niall Garbh O'Donnell (d. 1625) and sister of Aodh Ruadh (d. 1602), who is presented as a solitary mourner at the tomb of her brothers and nephew in Rome. (RIA/Irish Script on Screen)



keening women would have arrived from across Ireland to assist Nuala, while no house would have remained untouched by lamentation. In Ireland their tomb would have been surrounded by mourners, deeply affected by grief and sadness. Returning to Nuala's present vigil, he depicts her as lying prostrate beside the three bodies, whose untimely demise is described as the 'true culmination of our woe'. The poet then proceeds to review the lineage and conventional qualities of each of the deceased. He argues that had they fallen in Ireland their virtues would have occasioned both lamentation and joy—the unexpected latter reaction presumably prompted by their heroism and exemplary demeanour. Mac an Bhaird reflects on the potential impact of their deaths had they been killed in any of the successful Gaelic military actions undertaken against the Crown during the course of Hugh O'Neill's rebellion (1593–1603). Immediately he asserts that it would have constituted a cause of distress for all of Ulster. In sum,

their passing has proved a source of torment for the north of Ireland. In particular, Rory's passing presages disaster for Ireland. Directly addressing Nuala, the poet asks who of the Gaelic Irish would not weep with her for the loss of the flower of the *Gaoidhil*, and he urges her to transcend her sorrow, as she will join her kinsmen in due course. God's will is manifest and Nuala is urged to accept the outcome. Turning from Nuala to the Almighty, Mac an Bhaird implores Him to relieve the suffering of 'the survivors from war of Conall's blood' and to alleviate the destruction or 'shipwreck' (*longbhriseadh*) that has overtaken them. Addressing the Virgin Mary, who was traditionally perceived in medieval Christianity as a mediator between the human and the divine, Mac an Bhaird continues the theme of maritime disaster, which possibly also alludes to the ship that carried the northern earls into exile. He begs her to subdue the waves that engulf them and to rescue the ship of their children. This latter reference seems to

suggest that the fate of the next generation of the *Gaoidhil*, or perhaps more narrowly of the O'Donnells, hangs precariously in the balance. Jesus is beseeched to intervene on their behalf.

The poet states simply and effectively that he, like Nuala, had hoped that the Gaelic Irish might have been liberated in due course when the deceased men had first left Ireland. As in the case of Eochaidh Ó hEódhusa, Mac an Bhaird chronicles the impact of a devastating blow to aristocratic Gaelic society. But the poet is not acquiescent in the face of death and dislocation. In the final eight quatrains of the poem, Mac an Bhaird not only urges Nuala to move beyond a sense of fatalistic bereavement by appeasing divine wrath but also sketches a scenario that posits intervention by God, Jesus and Mary by way of alleviation of the plight of the *Gaoidhil*. In lamenting Gaelic misfortunes, Mac an Bhaird, critically, also broaches the possibility of communal redemption.

Conclusion

The work of praise poets reveals a record of cogent if despondent appraisal of the outcome of political, social, religious, economic, cultural and demographic change in Ulster during the first two decades of the seventeenth century. Poets were cognisant of the implications for elite Gaelic culture of the collapse of aristocratic Gaelic society and leadership. A range of emotions recur in these poems: anger, bitterness, sadness, resilience and occasionally optimism. At a personal level, poets manifested a high degree of autonomy and responded to crisis in a manner that exploited available opportunities. They were far from uncomprehending of the turbulent transformation in which they participated. ❧

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Further reading:
M. Caball, *Poets & politics: reaction and continuity in Irish poetry, 1558–1625* (Cork, 1998).
W. Gillies (ed.), 'A poem on the downfall of the *Gaoidhil*', *Éigse* 13 (1969–70), 203–10.
E. Knott (ed.), 'Mac an Bhaird's elegy on the Ulster lords', *Celtica* 5 (1960), 161–71.
C. Ní Dhomhnaill (ed.), *Duanaireacht* (Dublin, 1975).